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Ezra L. Stieglitz

Rhode Island College, estieglitz@ric.edu

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Author(s): Ezra L. Stieglitz

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Stieglitz teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in reading at Rhode Island College, Providence, Rhode Island.

A rating scale for evaluating English as a second language reading material

Ezra L. Stieglitz

In the last decade, a wide variety of commercial materials has been published for use in developing the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills of second language learners. This article focuses on the selection of instructional materials for the reading component of an English as a second language (ESL) program.

The professional literature contains numerous examples of checklists for evaluating reading materials (Ball, 1976; Committee for Basic Education, 1981; Irwin and Davis, 1980; Krause, 1976; Vacca, 1981). We need a different list: criteria for assessing the usefulness of these materials when the learner is not native to English. Therefore, I undertook to develop a rating scale for reading materials for ESL programs. The final product was based, in part, on information presented by Thonis (1970).

The instrument introduced in this article can be applied both to reading materials written specifically for ESL pupils and to materials intended for other populations. In the case of ESL material that introduces pupils to a wide variety of communication skills, this instrument can be applied to the reading component. Whenever reading materials for ESL pupils are reviewed, however, the evaluator must recognize the important interrelationship among all communication skills (Thonis, 1970, p. 37):

It is unnecessary for the pupil to possess a good background in oral language if he is to be successful in learning to read. Written language depends for its own existence upon the

prior existence of speech. Pupils who are learning to associate the written forms of their language with the oral ones must have well-developed spoken language if such associations are to be made.

The rating scale presented in this article should help teachers and administrators to assess the suitability of reading materials already in use, select new materials to meet the reading needs and interests of second language learners, be more objective about selecting instructional materials, share opinions and ideas regarding the appropriateness of materials, classify materials as suitable for different populations of pupils, and understand the importance and scope of reading instruction in an ESL program.

Description of rating scale

The evaluation instrument has three sections: background information, the skills of reading, and recommendation for adoption.

The information collected in section I provides an orientation to the material. Items related to program components, grade level, estimated readability level, and basis of the material evaluation are included in this part of the form.

The second section gives attention

to the aspects of reading that should be considered for ESL pupils: pre-reading skills, word identification skills and vocabulary development, and comprehension skills. Depending on the type of material, the reviewer may need to focus on only one or two of these reading areas. Other information pertinent to the selection of ESL materials is presented in section IID.

In the final section of this instrument, the data from the preceding section are compiled and the results used to make a recommendation for adoption.

References

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- Raygor, Alton L. "The Raygor Readability Estimate: A Quick and Easy Way to Determine Difficulty." In *Reading Theory, Research and Practice*, edited by P. David Pearson, pp. 259-63. Twenty-sixth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference. Clemson, S.C.: National Reading Conference, 1977.
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- Vacca, Richard T. *Content Area Reading*. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1981, pp. 259-62.

A rating scale for evaluating ESL reading material

Directions

After completing section I, the evaluator should rate the items listed in section II according to the scale shown. Quantitative evaluation is based on the average rating of criteria in section II. Criteria rated as "not applicable" are not figured into the calculations.

Users should note that additional criteria can be added to increase the relevance of this scale in various educational settings. When criteria are added to the list, include those ratings in the quantitative assessment. A form for computing and recording an overall score is included in section III.

Although the quantitative results should be used along with the information recorded in section I in recommending adoption or rejection of material reviewed, this rating scale is not intended as a rigid guide. It should, however, help the teacher identify limitations so that appropriate modifications can be made or supplementary materials obtained.

I. Background information

A. Reference data

Title of material: _____

Author: _____

Publisher: _____

Date of publication: _____

Edition: _____

Reviewer: _____

Title or position of reviewer: _____

Date of review: _____

B. Additional information

1. Major emphases

_____ Conversational English

_____ Listening skills

_____ Syntactic structures

_____ Vocabulary building

_____ Reading skills

_____ Writing skills

_____ Other: _____

Comments:

2. Program components

_____ Consumable workbook

_____ single volume

_____ series of books

_____ Textbook

_____ single volume _____ hardcover

_____ series of books _____ softcover

_____ Pamphlets

_____ Duplicating masters

_____ Pupil assessment instruments

_____ Recordings

_____ Filmstrips

_____ Films

_____ Videotapes

_____ Videodiscs

_____ Computer software

_____ Games

_____ Posters

_____ Other: _____

Comments:

3. Grades intended for

_____ Nursery and kindergarten

_____ Primary (1-3)

_____ Intermediate (4-6)

_____ Junior High (7-8)

_____ High School (9-12)

_____ Junior/community college

_____ Four year college/university

_____ Adult basic education

_____ Other: _____

Comments:

4. Which of the program components checked above were reviewed?

5. Estimated readability level (Formulas such as the Fry Readability Graph [Fry, 1977] or the Raygor Readability Estimate [Raygor, 1977] can be used to determine the readability level.)

- ☐ K-2
☐ 3-4
☐ 5-6
☐ 7-8
☐ 9-10
☐ 11-12
☐ 12+

Formula used to determine readability level: _____

6. Basis of material evaluation

- ☐ Inspection of the material
☐ Trial testing in the classroom
☐ Pupil opinions
☐ Data provided by the publisher
☐ Reviews in professional journals
☐ Other: _____

Comments:

II. The skills of reading

	Never	Rarely	Occa- sion- ally	Usually	Always	Not appli- cable
A. Prereading skills						
1. Is there practice in the visual identification of alphabet letters, especially those symbols which may be confused or not known by second language learners?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
2. Is there practice in identifying the sounds represented by the letters, with special attention to sounds which may be troublesome?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
3. Are the pictures used to represent specific consonant and vowel sounds part of the pupils' English listening/speaking vocabularies?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
4. Is there practice in left-to-right directionality, e.g., letter sequence in words, picture-story sequence on a page?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
5. Is emphasis placed on teaching important concepts in English, e.g., sizes, shapes, colors, first and last, up and down, small and big?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Other: _____	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Comments:						
B. Word identification skills and vocabulary development						
1. Are the words presented in exercises part of the pupils' listening/speaking vocabularies?	0	1	2	3	4	NA

2. Is practice provided in building the inflectional endings of English which serve as an aid to word identification and meaning (e.g., plurals, possessives, past tenses)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
3. Is attention given to prepositions, conjunctions and other such words which may be difficult for second language learners (e.g., <i>to, if, but, with, and</i>)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
4. Are new words presented and reinforced in context?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
5. Is there an organized and systematic plan for introducing new vocabulary (categories of words presented in a clear and logical order, from concrete to abstract)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
6. Is attention given to recognizing and comprehending figurative language and idiomatic expressions (e.g., "take a train," "catch a mouse," "as fit as a fiddle")?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
7. Are pupils introduced to words and expressions similar to ones in their native language (e.g., Spanish: burro, taco; French: perfume, crepe; German: waltz, strudel)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
8. Do pupils have repeated opportunities to use new words through vocabulary games and exercises that reinforce word meanings?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Other: _____	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Comments:						
C. Comprehension skills						
1. Is attention given to the various marks of punctuation?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
2. Are pupils shown how changes in stress and intonation may alter meanings (e.g., "Maria likes to play baseball" vs. "Maria likes to play baseball")?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
3. Is practice provided in determining how changes in word order can affect meaning (e.g., "Pat sat on a fat cat" vs. "A fat cat sat on Pat")?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
4. Is the order of introduction of grammatical forms controlled and logical?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
5. Are pupils taught to comprehend units of increasing size (i.e., phrases, sentences, paragraphs)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA

6. Are pupils given drills in sentence patterns that involve substitutions, expansions, replacements, and transformations?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
7. Is emphasis placed on using lower level comprehension skills to develop higher level skills (e.g., pupils are shown how to use details to find main ideas, draw conclusions, make generalizations, etc.)?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
8. Is emphasis placed on helping pupils become familiar with the process involved in the skill and how to use a particular comprehension skill?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Other: _____	0	1	2	3	4	NA

Comments:

D. Additional criteria

1. Does the material include a clear description of the scope and sequence of reading/ language skills introduced?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
2. Do lessons focus on the discovery and establishment of a single concept or skill?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
3. Does the material provide insights into contemporary American/Canadian/British/ etc. culture? Which? _____	0	1	2	3	4	NA
4. Are members of ethnic minorities represented?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
5. Are cultural stereotypes avoided and are authentic representations of the culture given?	0	1	2	3	4	NA
Other: _____	0	1	2	3	4	NA

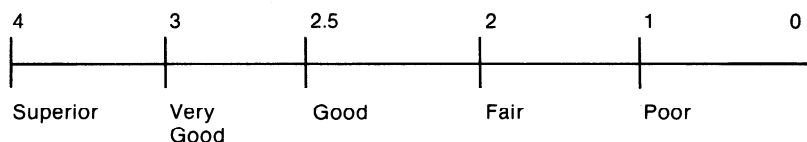
Comments:

III. Recommendations for adoption

A. Quantitative evaluation ("not applicable" responses are not used in the calculations)

Overall rating of material (Section II):

Sum of ratings _____ = _____ = (average rating score)
Number of items rated



B. Recommendations

- _____ Clearly outstanding and should be adopted
- _____ Very good, and possibly should be adopted
- _____ Of average quality and could be adopted
- _____ Below average or does not meet needs
- _____ In need of further review

Additional comments:

Thumbs down on reading

At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes called Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

From *The Dialogues of Plato*. "Phaedrus," pp. 460-61. The Third Jowett Translation, edited by William C. Greene. New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1954. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.